

Legislature shouldn't put charter schools on the back burner

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State lawmakers must act to keep charter schools alive in Washington in a way that aligns closely with the original, voter-approved initiative.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

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After the state Supreme Court delivered a devastating blow to Washington's new charter schools, lawmakers must act to save this important option for families.

In 2012, Washington voters approved the creation of charter schools as public schools that would operate independently using taxpayer dollars. But the court ruled last year that charter schools do not qualify as "common schools," a term for most public schools in the state, and therefore cannot receive public dollars that are restricted to common schools under the state constitution.

The state Legislature must tailor a solution that maintains the intent of the charter school law without running afoul of the constitution.

The good news is that state lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are acting with urgency to keep charter schools alive and [have proposed two bills to fix the problem](#).

More than 1,300 students enrolled in the state's nine charter schools last fall. In their brief existence, the schools have energized students and parents, who wanted an alternative to traditional public schools. Charters have more options in their approach to serving students, including offering more days of instruction, more training for teachers and specialized curriculum.

Sen. Steve Litzow, R-Mercer Island, and Rep. Eric Pettigrew, D-Renton, have proposed an approach that is most promising in mirroring the charter school bill and allowing charter schools to continue and new ones to start. Senate Bill 6194 would use the Washington Opportunities Pathways account to pay for charter schools and other

publicly funded education programs that also don't qualify as common schools, such as tribal schools and the Running Start program.

The account, funded by the state lottery proceeds, doesn't touch common schools money and has paid for a variety of programs, including college scholarships and early childhood education.

Sen. Andy Billig, D-Spokane, and Sen. Michael Baumgartner, R-Spokane, proposed Senate Bill 6163 to put charter schools under the supervision of local school boards. That might help the two Spokane schools that already operate under their local school board, but does not assure that districts in other parts of the state would show the same willingness to oversee charter schools.

A hearing on both bills is scheduled to begin at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday. The Senate is likely to pass a solution, but the path is less certain in the House, where the teachers union that opposes charter schools holds more sway. Speaker Frank Chopp and Education committee Chair Sharon Tomiko Santos need to ensure there are hearings and votes on worthy proposals.

Gov. Jay Inslee has never been a champion of charter schools. He needs to show some leadership and help the Legislature craft a bill he will sign.

In this short session, lawmakers must show progress toward fully funding basic education in this state. Some suggest that the charter schools issue is a distraction from that important job. Nonsense.

Charter schools are an important part of meeting the needs of all of our state's students. The Legislature can do both.

Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, Thanh Tan, Blanca Torres, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).